

Next Apocalypse by VerityR

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Summary:

Jonathan comes home, again and again and again. Nancy stops waiting for the worst. Or, in Steve's words, "It was a little more convenient for our social circle when supernatural threats materialized on an annual basis."

Next Apocalypse

October 8th, 1984

It was autumn, finally. Summer had outlived its welcome by a longshot, shambling into a sweaty, humid September. The leaves were changing color. It was cool, but not yet cold. The air was all crisp apples, sharp pencils, new pennies. And Jonathan was stuck working in the gas station, listening to angry old men talking politics like no one could live without their brilliant insights.

“If your boy Kennedy had run, maybe we’d be having a different conversation. But against Mondale? Reagan could walk onto that stage hailing Satan and *still* win. Easily! An incumbent— ”

“These young kids get their news from the television! Take Nixon. If you fail on the debate stage—”

“Look,” Jonathan attempted to interject.

“There’s still two debates left, even if I agreed with your point, which I don’t— ”

“If you’re not gonna buy anything...”

“Pack of Reds,” the Reagan supporter demanded, throwing a crumpled wad of bills on the counter. “As I was saying, it was only the first debate. And when that Ferraro woman—”

“Have a nice day,” Jonathan said, tossing the guy his cigarettes.

It should’ve been a relief when the Reagan guy turned around, muttering about today’s youth and ungrateful punks. And it was, until Jonathan heard what the other guy, the Democrat, was muttering as they left the store.

“...have to tread carefully with that one. Yeah, with the dead brother. Who turned out to be not-so-dead. You know, with a father like that.. ”

Jonathan tore a cuticle off his nail and watched as blood bubbled up.

“Just this, please. Unless you were looking to chat about the debate some more.”

It was Nancy.

Jonathan blinked, as if her presence could be some kind of hallucination brought on by the meager amount of sleep he'd gotten last night.

“Didn't happen to catch it,” he managed to get out.

“My dad made us watch it,” Nancy admitted, looking sort of embarrassed. “In a totally fascistic move.”

“Well, he is voting for Reagan.”

Mercifully, she laughed.

Emboldened, Jonathan started talking before his brain could shut him down. “You can just take the coffee. It's on me.”

Nancy's eyes widened. “Oh, you don't have to— ”

“It's no big deal,” Jonathan said, like it was the sort of thing he did all the time. Right. For all those friends he definitely had.

“Why are you working right now, anyway? Don't you have class?” She definitely looked embarrassed now, twisting the ring on her index finger absent-mindedly.

“I have first and second free,” he explained. He didn't say that he was trying to save money for college. And that it was no longer an option to take night shifts after everything last year. “Shouldn't *you* be in class?”

“I'm, ah,” Nancy looked surprised at herself. “Skipping, I guess.”

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. “You guess?”

“If I decided to buy a magazine, would you try and pay for that too?”

He rolled his eyes. “Dying for the latest about the royal baby?”

“Or that?” She pointed at the slushie machine.

“Not for sale, sorry.”

“Just trying to see how far this whole free coffee thing goes.”

“What do you have this period, anyway?”

Though he was pretty sure she’d been kidding, Nancy did start flipping through the tabloids, which were, as he’d predicted, filled with shots of Princess Di and her pumpkin-headed spawn.

“Econ,” she answered, eventually.

“If you were in econ,” Jonathan pointed out, “they’d tell you there’s no such thing as a free coffee.”

Nancy half-smiled. Still playing with her ring. “So what’s this gonna cost me?”

“I didn’t mean— ”

“I know. I know you didn’t.”

Jonathan felt he was well and truly out of words.

“Look, maybe I should try and make it after all.”

He wasn’t about to point out that it was five after already. She’d be fifteen minutes late at best. Whatever. Nancy was allowed to avoid him if she wanted to. And it didn’t even count as avoiding if you weren’t friends in the first place. Which they weren’t, exactly.

“Yeah,” was what he said instead of all that. “Have fun with Marx.”

Nancy was halfway out the door, precariously balancing her coffee and her bag and the wallet she’d never opened.

“And Jonathan?”

“Yeah?”

“We should hang out sometime, okay?” She wasn’t looking at him when she said it. “We shouldn’t have to wait for... I don’t know. Let’s just hang out sometime.”

Jonathan nodded and tried to smile. Nancy waved as the door chimed merrily behind her.

December 22nd, 1992

It hadn’t snowed yet, but Steve kept looking hopefully out the window. As if his enthusiasm could convince the slushy rain to configure itself into something a little more White Christmas. Though, if anyone could do it, it was Steve.

“So.” Steve rapped his knuckles across the bar, clearly trying for casual. Subtlety had never been a great look on him. “You hear much from her these days?”

Jonathan shook his head. “Not since...” He took a swig of beer. “I don’t even know. The last time, I guess.”

“Am I ever going to get an explanation for all that, by the way?”

Jonathan considered this. “No.”

“She obviously knows that it wasn’t your fault. Best laid plans, and all of that. Even when you two are doing the planning.”

“That time was just her.”

Steve gave him a look.

“I’m not saying it was her fault.” Jonathan pinched his temples. “Things had... changed before that.”

The only sound came from the tinny roar of the TV.

“It doesn’t matter.” Jonathan sighed. “I’m there when I can be helpful.”

“It was a little more convenient for our social circle when supernatural threats materialized on an annual basis.”

Jonathan laughed, his shoulders feeling a little less heavy. He always seemed to forget why he kept in touch with Steve until he saw him again.

“Beats high school reunions.”

“How would you know? Seeing as you didn’t bother to show up to your own.”

“Who goes to a five year reunion? Congratulations, some of you graduated college. Some of you dicked around Indiana for slightly longer than you had before.”

“Cynicism,” Steve pronounced, gnawing on a chicken wing, “is an unattractive trait.”

“Thanks,” Jonathan said, rolling his eyes, “but I’m not really looking for tips on that front.”

“Now’s the time to strike!” Steve insisted, gesticulating, chicken still in hand. “Grunge is in, man. Your hair is finally on trend!”

“Been doing stand-up again?”

Steve pouted. “That was one time, and I thought we all agreed to never mention it again.”

“You agreed.”

“Regardless,” Steve said, signalling for the bartender to bring another round, “you can’t show up to your ten year reunion with a hot wife and 2.5 kids unless you put yourself out there, Jonny-boy.”

Jonathan grimaced. He stared into the foam of the beer that had been set down in front of him.

“Explain something to me, Steve. How are you supposed to bring kids into a world like this?”

As soon as he'd said it, he wished he hadn't. But Jonathan was surprised by how nonchalantly Steve took his words. It was hard to remember, sometimes. They were all grown ups now. Steve only shrugged.

"It isn't *our* world that's the problem."

October 9th, 1984

Apparently, Nancy hadn't been kidding around about the hanging out thing. Jonathan had only pieced this together by the time school got out, which is when he found his passenger seat full of Nancy Wheeler.

"You broke into my car," Jonathan noted.

"You left your car unlocked," Nancy corrected. "And we're hanging out."

"We are." He wasn't sure if it was a question or not.

"I'm here, right?" Nancy raised an eyebrow. "You're here."

"Was there a second part to this plan," Jonathan asked, starting the car. "Or had you only gotten as far as kidnapping me?"

"It's *your* car," Nancy pointed out, and eyes widening in a false display of innocence.

Jonathan scoffed, without much conviction.

He pulled out of the high school parking lot without much of an idea of where to go. He passed by the Wheeler house, in case she had really just wanted a ride. Nancy's eyes stayed trained forward, so he kept going. She chatted amiably. About classes, about college apps, about some party of Steve's that Jonathan was allegedly welcome to. And he mostly nodded and laughed in the right places and wondered what she thought about the music he was playing, until he reminded

himself he wasn't supposed to care.

They'd been driving for a while. The rows of prim gingerbread houses had given way to fields and abandoned lots. Nancy rolled down the window. Despite himself, Jonathan looked at her. The sight of her newly short hair blowing in the wind was enough to land them both in a ditch. Jonathan forced himself to keep his eyes on the road, biting his cheek.

"I hate this time of year," Nancy said. To herself, almost.

He didn't speak. They had passed one of those corny pick your own pumpkin places. Seemed a little early, in his opinion. But these weren't prize-winning big yet, if they were ever going to be. The more he looked at the field, dotted with orange, the more off it looked. Like an alien, fungal blight. His teeth had drawn blood. His mouth tasted like pennies.

"Everything is dying." She was still looking out the window. "It's not hot, it's not cold. It's nothing."

"It's better than too hot. Or cold. Right?"

Nancy turned to look at him with an odd quirk in her mouth. He wasn't left with much of anything to say.

They had passed the pumpkins when Nancy said, "We're in purgatory, I think."

Jonathan pulled over, then. Nancy seemed taken aback.

"Why did you— "

"I don't know, I... " He sighed. "You don't seem okay."

Nancy was completely changed, now; the spark of determination that'd been in her eyes mere minutes ago extinguished. Jonathan wasn't sure if it was his presence that had caused it, or if this was Nancy letting her guard down.

"Tell me you don't feel it too."

His heart was in his throat. Idiot. “Feel what?”

“That this isn’t living!” Nancy was manic now, her dinner-plate eyes taking up half her skull. “It’s *waiting*! For the next... whatever!”

“Nancy, I don’t— ”

“You think that thing was the only one? We’re supposed to go about our lives, not worrying about a whole *world* full of monsters? When we couldn’t even kill one of them? A whole other world where I’ve *been*! where my best friend is *rotting*, where... ”

She broke off, choked up.

“I’m sorry... ” Her hands shook as she reached for the car door. “I shouldn’t have... it’s not fair, it should be over. It *is* over. I’m... ”

“Nancy, wait.”

She was walking off, definitely not in the direction of her house.

“Nancy!”

She turned around, rubbing at her eyes.

“You’re allowed to be messed up about this, you know. It’s not exactly a normal situation.”

Nancy shook her head, eyes trained on the ground, running her hands through her hair.

“I don’t know, Jonathan.” She looked up. “I don’t know why I can’t get over it.”

“You think I’m over it?” He couldn’t help sounding indignant, even though he’d meant to calm her down.

Her brows drew together. “I don’t know. It’s not like we... you could be.”

“Well, I’m not.” Jonathan tried to keep the trembling out of his voice. “I’m not. You’re not the only person affected by all of this. So stop

feeling bad for yourself.”

Jonathan thought for a second she might hit him, but instead, she laughed. Weakly, with tears welling up in her eyes. And, fuck it all, he wasn't going to stand there and let her cry. She seemed to have the same idea, falling into his arms. It wasn't clear if she was laughing or sobbing. They stayed like that for maybe a minute, her hands balled into fists against his chest. The sky could've cracked open, monsters falling on their heads like the spiders in his shed. They wouldn't have noticed. Nancy unclenched her fists, her palms spreading across his chest, his neck. Jonathan stroked her hair.

Nancy stiffened against him, then. She pulled away.

“I have to... I can't.” Nancy started walking away.

“Where are you going!” He really couldn't stop being an idiot. Fuck. “At least let me drive you.”

Nancy shook her head. “Steve's. I'm going to... I forgot, I told him I'd... I just can't, Jonathan. I was wrong. I can't.”

His throat was tight, every muscle tense. But he didn't follow her. Jonathan stayed in the field until the sunset, which was when he decided he couldn't come up with a reason to stay out that wouldn't worry his mom. He turned the stereo off, driving home to the sound of the wind.

November 4th, 1983

It was fall, and everything was dying. Someone had cracked a window in the cafeteria. It still smelled like the ghost of a thousand lunches, now with a rancid note of dead, wet leaves.

Lisa Chen was trading Lisa Gordon an apple for a Twinkie. A table full of freshmen proto-jocks were copying each other's homework. They either had a complex system worked out, so each party only had to do one subject's work, or they were a group of friends with a

very balanced skill set. Chris and Eddie from his Chem class were playing paper football. Eddie was cheerfully losing. Steve Harrington was loudly, exuberantly hitting on Nancy Wheeler. This process seemed to involve a troubling amount of hand-gesturing. Jonathan Byers was sitting at a table by himself, watching other people eat.

But it was less creepy than it sounded.

Well, kind of.

Jonathan had only shown up to the cafeteria in the first place to meet up with his partner for a history presentation. She hadn't shown, which Jonathan had to admit was a bold way to admit she'd be forcing him to do all the work. Which was fine. Group presentations? Not exactly his strong suit.

But there was still a chance that Trish Miller might show up and spare him the trouble of memorizing Civil War battles all weekend instead of earning money. Which was preventing Jonathan from ditching the caf to spend his lunch period like he usually did. Namely, in the darkroom, in his car, or smoking on the steps.

Though it could be, Jonathan mused, watching as Steve brushed a lock of hair out of Nancy's eyes, that he was a glutton for punishment.

Not that he liked Nancy, or anything. In fact, he outright disliked her. Regardless of the crush Jonathan may or may not have harbored for Nancy Wheeler at some point in the distant past. As it stood, she was just another one of the materialistic, capitalistic, trend-abiding, top 40-listening prepsters with whom he was forced to share a school.

He felt bad for any girl under the thrall of Steve Harrington, was all.

Jonathan was started back to reality by the argument breaking out at the table next to him. It seemed the paper football had crushed by a Varsity jacket wearing goon with a shaved head. And now Eddie was trying to argue the game had been a draw.

Steve fucked off back to his regular table of sycophants, leaving Nancy and her red-headed friend to put their heads together with

barely concealed giggles.

Jonathan dumped his half-eaten lunch in the trash.

September 9th, 1987

“Because I trust you, obviously!” Her hair was slipping out of its ponytail.

“That’s the only reason you wanted to see me? That’s the only reason I came back?”

Nancy threw her hands up. “Yes! I’ve told you before, I’ve told you so *many times*! It isn’t fair for you to— ”

“Whatever, Nancy. I’d say to call me when you get sick of waiting around for your life to begin, but that’s clearly never going to happen.”

“Jonathan, don’t.”

“Just call me next time there’s an apocalypse, okay?”

November 10th, 1983

Jonathan had never been afraid of the woods. When you had no friends, an asshole father, and lived in the middle of nowhere, the woods could be a convenient place to slip off to. It’d be nice, if that were all Will had done. Hid out in the fort Jonathan had been happy to help him build. Maybe that’s what he’d been doing, when the... whatever it was got him. All because Jonathan had convinced his brother the world was a safe place to be. And because Jonathan hadn’t been there.

Nothing felt especially safe now. As if a baseball bat was going to be protection enough. Or Nancy Wheeler with a gun.

A ridiculous sentence based on an idea that felt more ridiculous by the minute.

After the fight they'd had, she'd been trailing after him, stewing with silent fury. Not that he could see why the opinion of a 'pretentious creep' should worry her so much. God, everything was a popularity contest with girls like her. She'd worn white gloves to hunt through the woods for a monster, for fuck's sake. There was no reasoning with a person like that. Nancy was...

Jonathan was disgusted with himself. That she was could take up so much of his thoughts when his brother was missing and possibly dead and that was what this whole thing was about. It was an alliance, not a... tea party, or whatever. There was no time for bickering. It had been a mistake to let her come. It had been stupid to think anyone could care about this the way he did.

December 12th, 1989

The moon hung fat and full in the sky. Jonathan had almost forgotten how many more stars you saw in Hawkins. Nancy's face was turning pink in the cold.

"You need the hazmat suit," she instructed, without meeting his eyes.

"I know."

"It's important," Nancy snapped.

"I *know*."

It had never been like this between them before. When they were partners. What was he now? A seasonal employee?

Steve was already pulling the suit on. It was a relief to not have to look at his new, severely cropped hair.

"We gotcha, Nance." He gave a thumbs up. Steve attempting to play

a peacemaker was at once hilarious and maddening.

“It’s an extraction. We go in— ”

“We shoot, we go out.” Jonathan started getting into the suit. “Think we can handle it?”

Nancy pursed her lips. “I’ve been working on this for a year.”

Steve elbowed him sharply in the ribs.

She pressed on. “The tear should appear exactly— ”

“There!”

Jonathan and Nancy shared an eyeroll at the outburst, which was so quintessential Steve it demanded to be recognized. They didn’t have time to be embarrassed at the unconscious acknowledgment of an intimacy they had worked so hard to ignore.

It was time for battle. They had always been good at that. It might have been the only thing they were ever really good at.

November 13th, 1983

It was done. The trap was set. The only thing to do was wait. Wait, and tend to their wounds. Which Nancy was doing, with steady, capable fingers. Anything worth doing, Nancy could do competently. He’d been more than wrong about her. He’d been wrong about himself. Nancy wasn’t just great. She was great with him. They were great together. They were going to do this. Kill the monster. Save Will. Save everyone.

December 24th, 1992

They didn't have any milk. His mom had spent half the day making a bunch of food she would inevitable undercook or overcook, but the process would all be for naught if she didn't have milk to make some dessert none of them ever ate. Which was how Jonathan found himself at the gas station he'd worked in as a teenager, buying a puny quart of milk on Christmas Eve.

Jonathan got in and out in record time, leaving his change for the beleaguered cashier. It should've been too dark to see her. She was too far in front of him. There was only the barest sliver of a moon. But there was Nancy, walking away. Her ponytail, swaying up and down, catching in the moonlight.

"Nancy."

She swung around, eyes wide. "Jonathan?" She looked tired. She looked happy. She held up a bag. "My mom needed more eggs."

Jonathan gestured to his own bag. "Milk."

Nancy grinned. Heart, meet throat.

"Tell your Mom and Mike I say hi," Jonathan said, quickly. "And Merry Christmas."

"Same to yours," Nancy answered, twirling a ring around her finger.

"For what it's worth," Jonathan said, before he could lose the nerve. "I'm sorry."

Nancy knit her brow.

"Your plan should've worked. It was my fault for screwing it up. If I'd just listened to you, it wouldn't have happened."

"If you'd listened to me," Nancy pointed out, "it would've been our plan."

"I guess so." Jonathan shrugged. "I should, ah... "

"For what it's worth," she interrupted, "I don't think we could've done it. Either way."

Jonathan frowned. “And that makes you feel *better*?”

“Well... yeah.”

He couldn't help but laugh. “I've missed you. Call me before the apocalypse, next time.”

He'd already started walking when she called his name.

“Jonathan?”

God help him. There was never any choice in looking back. Her eyes gleamed.

“Let's hang out sometime, okay?”

“Yeah,” His mouth twitched with what might have been a smile.
“Okay.”

Author's Note:

Forgive me if there are any glaring typos in this, because I elected to finish this instead of sleeping. Mea culpa! I'm so excited for season 2 that I really can't bring myself to be too upset that all of this is going to be imminently jossed. Let me know what you think, as always.